

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: EGERTON Y. DAVIS, M.D., AND PLACENTOPHAGY

It is not surprising that Dr. William B. Ober, in his admirable "Notes on Placentophagy" (*Bull. N.Y. Acad. Med.* 55:591-99, 1979) omitted to mention Dr. E. Y. Davis' account of this habit amongst the Indian tribes around the Great Slave Lake of the North West Territory, as his paper on the subject, which was to have been published in the May 1882 issue (Volume 10) of the *Canada Medical and Surgical Journal*, was suppressed, as there were some unjustified aspersions on the author's veracity.¹ However, I have some notes made by my grandfather, who was present at the meeting of the Montreal Medico-Chirurgical Society when the secretary read Dr. Davis' paper.² One of the sections is headed, "A Vile Custom:"

The greatest delicacy of the Indian cuisine is baked placenta. An oven is got ready and immediately after delivery the placenta, surrounded by pieces of the cord, is baked until it has shrunk to half its size. Only the braves eat it as they believe it forms the child and is beneficial to them as a source of strength and courage. . . .

Social anthropology suffered a sad loss when Dr. Davis drowned in the Lachine Rapids in 1884, for one of his last letters was a brief account of a remarkable case of Hildebrandt's disorder,³ which he had observed when in practice in Pentonville, England (*Medical News* 45:673, 1884). Fortunately his son, who was also a physician, submitted Dr. Davis' authoritative study of this condition to *Archives of the Medical Sciences* (5:35-39, January 1894), though I have never been able to find a copy of this particular journal.⁴

It is of some interest that members of Dr. Davis' family are still living at Yellowknife, one of whom first reported the remarkable UFO discharging red flames and white balls of fire observed there on January 24, 1978.⁵ Last year, the husband of Marlene, Dr. Davis' granddaughter, was visiting in London in an endeavor to trace some of the descendants of the uncomfortable liaison recounted by the old doctor in the *Medical News* nearly a century ago, and hoped to present to the Royal College of

Physicians of London one of the Harveian relics from the Davis Collection in the Caughnawauga Guildhall.⁶

I remain, Dear Sir,

Your obedient servant.⁷

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Placentophagy is one of the customs which E. Y. D. described in the manuscript "Professional Notes among the Indian Tribe about the Great Slave Lake. N. W. T.," which was almost printed in the *Canada Medical-Surgical Journal* in May 1882, and is now under fairly secure lock and key in the Osler Library at McGill (Bibliotheca Cat. No. 7641; Harvey Cushing, *The Life of Sir William Osler*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1925, i. 181.). However, back in 1934 I heard John Beattie give the Osler Oration on "The True Record of Egerton Yorick Davis, M.D." in which he read the "Professional Notes." And with prescience I made some notes though the oration has never been published.
2. My grandfather was never in Canada and the story of the meeting of the Montreal Med-Chi is based on Bayard Holmes' account ("The Relationship of Medical Literature to Professional Esteem." *Lancet-Clinic* 114:164, 1915; this appears on pp. 8, 9 of the reprint in the Osler Library (Bibliotheca No. 7114), to which Osler had added "A very good E. Y. D. story, the *ben trovato* character of which is heightened by the absence of all truth. . . .")
3. Hildebrandt's disorder is penis captivus due to vaginismus. Theophilus Parvin quoted Hildebrandt's account (*Handbuch der Frauenkrankheiten*, ed. Th. Bilroth, 1872) in the editorial "An Uncommon form of Vaginismus" (*Med. News*. 43:602-03, 1884) which stimulated E. Y. D. to recount his experiences in Pentonville; "Vaginismus" [letter] (*Med. News*. 45:673, 1884). The letter, etc., was reprinted by Earl Nation in: William Osler on penis captivus and other urologic topics. *Urology* 2:468-70, 1973. 1973].
4. *Archives of the Medical Sciences* is a dummy titlepage and table of contents prepared by Osler when the Johns Hopkins faculty were considering publishing a monthly journal in 1893; in the end, the journal became the *Journal of Experimental Medicine*, though the first number did not appear until January 1896. (Bates, D. G. and Bensley, E. H.: The inner history of the Johns Hopkins Hospital. *Johns Hopkins Medical Journal* 125:184-94 1969; Simon Flexner and J. T. Flexner, *William Henry Welch and the Heroic Age of American Medicine* [New York, Viking Press, 1941] pp. 209, 243). Osler included in the table of contents the titles of four articles which, "when read almost convulsed the faculty"—"On the Treatment of Chronic Gastritis" by Welch (Welch had no clinical experience, but had written the article on diseases of the

stomach in *The System of Medicine*); "On the Lesions of the Hydatid of Morgagni" by Kelly; "The Advantages of Warren's Method for the Cure of Hernia" by Halsted (Halsted loathed Warren, who had written on hernia); and "Further researches on the Maladie de Hildebrandt" by Egerton Y. Davis.

5. The descent of the Russian spacecraft, Cosmos 954, which crashed in Canada on January 24, 1978, was observed at Yellowknife, by the Great Slave Lake in the North West Territory, where E. Y. D. had practiced as a U.S. Army surgeon. (*The Times* [London] No. 60219, Tuesday January 25, 1978, p. 1, cols. 1, 2.)
6. Marlene Yorick Davis and Harvey's blood pressure apparatus were manifestations initiated during the 1949 Osler Centennial Celebration by Sir Hugh Cairns and Sir Geoffrey and Lady Jefferson (née

Gertrude Flumerfeld, alias Trotula, vide Harvey Cushing, *The Life of Sir William Osler*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1927, ii:203, etc.). Earl Nation has given some account of this in "Osler's Alter Ego." *Diseases of the Chest* 56:531-537, 1969).

7. In American usage this form of conclusion is reserved for the use of the Secretary of State when breaking off diplomatic relations after a war has been declared, but when letters are addressed to the editor of the *London Times*, it is *de rigueur* to conclude, "I remain, Dear Sir, Your obedient servant," though this was usually elided to "Yours etc." Naturally, the editor, when expressing his profound regret that he could not publish the letter, could be neither sincere, true, faithful, nor an obedient servant to the would-be contributor and again was "Yours etc."